

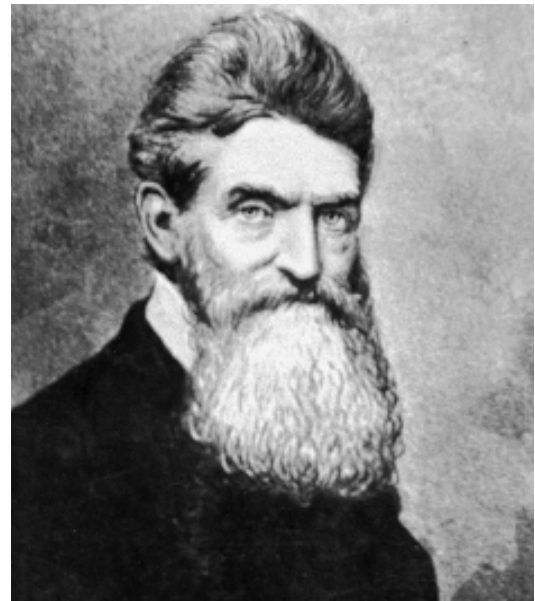
## Bicentennial of a Birth

### John Brown—Life and Legacy

**J**ohn Brown. Was he a madman or martyr, murderer or saint? Do the ends ever justify the means? Countless books and articles have been written debating the issues. Songs have been composed. Film makers have presented him on the silver screen and Stephen Vincent Benet immortalized him in his Pulitzer Prize-winning epic poem *John Brown's Body*. As we approach the bicentennial of Brown's birth (May 9, 2000), opposing opinions continue to swirl around this controversial figure like the unsettling tornado depicted in John Steuart Curry's "The Tragic Prelude," a mural of Brown that graces the Kansas Statehouse. Brown was many things, but first and foremost, he was an abolitionist who dedicated his life to ending slavery in the United States.

Wanted for murders committed along the Pottawatomie Creek during the Bleeding Kansas slavery war, Brown was 59 years old when he led his "Provisional Army" of 21 men, 16 whites and 5 blacks, at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). His plan was to seize the guns from the United States Armory and Arsenal and execute raids throughout the slave-holding south, ultimately forcing an end to slavery.

The night of October 16, 1859 Brown and 19 of his men crept into the sleeping town of Harpers Ferry. They took control of the armory, arsenal, and U.S. Rifle Works; and rounded up several hostages. The raid had begun. Throughout the day on the 17th, Brown and his men battled townspeople and local militia companies who finally forced them to take refuge in the armory's fire engine house, today known as John Brown's Fort. On the morning of October 18, Colonel Robert E. Lee, in immediate command of a detachment of U.S. Marines, ordered Lt. J.E.B. Stuart to the door of the engine house offering one last chance to surrender. Brown refused. Twelve Marines stormed the building, captured Brown and the remaining raiders, and freed the hostages. Brown's raid ended 36 hours after it had begun.



Taken to the jail and courthouse in Charles Town, Virginia, (now West Virginia) he was charged with murder, conspiracy to lead a slave rebellion, and treason. During the subsequent trial, he was found guilty on all three charges and sentenced to be hanged. Brown was hanged in Charles Town on December 2, 1859.

His raid had failed, but Brown had succeeded in focusing the nation's attention on the issue of slavery. In a note left with his jailer, Brown wrote,

I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done.

Sixteen months later the first shots of the American Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter.

In *Great Lives Observed John Brown* edited by Richard Warch and Jonathan F. Fanton, the legacy of Brown's life is explored. They write,

When legal solutions fail to meet widely perceived needs, when civil disobedience fails to alter policy, acts of violence often result. In the American experience, such acts have served periodically to crystallize the tensions and fears in the national mood. John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry stands with the Boston Massacre, the Nat Turner insurrection, the Haymarket Riot, Watts, and the killings at Kent State as occasions for the country to clarify—and even polarize—its major concerns. This for better or for worse, is part of the legacy of John Brown.... He was...a man of purpose who translated thought to action,

who attempted what others only contemplated, and who was faithful to the dictates of his conscience. He believed in the promise of the Declaration of Independence and anguished over its unfulfillment. However one may judge his means, he sought to realize that promise for black Americans.

### **John Brown 2000**

In May 2000, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park will host a variety of events, including commemorative, educational, dramatic presentations, and interpretative activities that deal with John Brown; his life, within the larger context of the slavery issue; his influence; and his place in history. Included among the many partners sharing in the sponsorship of this event are The Harpers Ferry Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Jefferson County NAACP, the John Brown Heritage Association, and Penn State University, Mont Alto Campus.

These activities will begin on Tuesday, May 9, 2000, with a program commemorating the 200th birthday of John Brown. A specially designed bicentennial postal cancellation will be unveiled by the United States Postal Service and will be available at a USPS cancellation station within the park. Commemorative cachets will be available for the event.

The park will also be hosting a special exhibit, "Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South." Developed as a traveling exhibit by the Smithsonian Institution, the exhibit will be located on the second floor of the John Brown Museum. This exhibit examines the individual, family, and community life of 19th-century African Americans against the backdrop of one of the most tumultuous eras in American history. Musical instruments, tools, household items, objects of spiritual significance, manuscripts, and photos of black Americans—slave and free—are part of this exhibition.

In addition, "Designs for Escape: The Underground Railroad Quilt Code" will be on display throughout the John Brown 2000 event. Dr. Dobard, author of *Hidden in Plain View*, will speak about the underground railroad quilt code and the significance of this code in helping slaves to escape.

Starting Friday, May 12, the park will sponsor a special public education weekend on John Brown for the visiting public. Featured speakers

on May 13th include Dr. Stephen B. Oates, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (ret), Fred Morsell as Frederick Douglass, and a keynote address by The Honorable John Lewis, U.S. House of Representatives.

Several possible dramatic presentations are being considered at this time. One option is the two-act drama by Julia Davis, "The Anvil," based on the trial of John Brown. Another possibility is a stage performance of "John Brown's Body" by Stephen Vincent Benet. Times and dates will be announced once plans are finalized.

On Monday, May 15, a three-day, John Brown 2000 conference will begin. The conference will be held in the Camp Hill district of the park and will be conducted in partnership with the Organization of American Historians. A call for papers went out in the fall of 1999 and closed on January 15, 2000. A final agenda, along with conference registration information, is now available.

These events will help to enhance the interpretation and public education of the story of John Brown and provide historic and contemporary insights into one of America's most controversial figures.

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park Homepage can be accessed at  
<<http://www.nps.gov/hafe/home.htm>>.

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## **Legends of Tuskegee**

The Museum Management Program has launched the Legends of Tuskegee web exhibit that commemorates Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and the Tuskegee Airmen. The exhibit features a wide array of related museum and archival collections, as well as quicktime panoramic views of the den and parlor in The Oaks, Washington's residence, and a video on the Tuskegee Airmen. Visit the site at

<[www.cr.nps.gov/csd/exhibits/index.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/exhibits/index.htm)>.